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Hiring outlook dipped below 50% for the first time since 2002, according to the latest Quarterly Direct Marketing Employment Survey from Bernhart Associates Executive Search LLC. According to the survey, 47% of the 132 direct marketing agencies responding said they were planning to add staff during the third quarter of 2008. This is a 7% decrease from last quarter.

The survey states that layoffs and hiring freezes remain unchanged. Twelve percent of respondents are planning staff cutbacks and 20% are freezing their hiring efforts. Additionally, 40% of companies said they are not planning any changes in staff.

According to Jerry Bernhart, president of Bernhart Associates, the most surprising aspect of the survey was that there hasn't been a large spike in layoffs. "I think it could be a lot worse," he said. "There have been some widely reported cutbacks in the industry and the fact of the matter is it's not widespread."

Bernhart Associates has been putting out a quarterly survey for eight years.

"What we're seeing is that the results pretty closely mirror the state of the economy," Bernhart said. "If [the economy] is down, the numbers match." He goes on to say that the survey is a great indicator for the future of DM hiring because it asks what the companies plan to do, not what they have already done. "We ask their plans for the coming three months. So that means as soon as our numbers show an up tick, it's an indication that the labor market could be showing improvement in the months to come."

"It's tougher out there, no question. But companies are still hiring," he continues. "There is still uncertainty, but there's not a sense of widespread panic."